



Rural Community Network

SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

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RPTD

Response to DRD Accessible Transport Strategy Draft Action Plan 2009 - 2012

38a Oldtown Street
Cookstown
Co Tyrone
BT80 8EF
Tel: 028 8676 6670
Fax: 028 8676 6006
caroline@ruralcommunitynetwork.org

Introduction

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established by community groups from rural areas in 1991 to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality. We are part of a wider rural community development networking infrastructure that includes Rural Support Networks (RSN's) and the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) covering the whole of rural Northern Ireland.

RCN is committed to a rural community and networking approach to the planning and development of sustainable rural communities in order to address poverty, social exclusion and equality and to support work towards a shared future.

RCN welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Accessible Transport Strategy 2009 – 2012.

General Comments – Context Setting

Although social exclusion and poverty in rural and urban areas of Northern Ireland have many common features in Northern Ireland, there are a number of distinct rural characteristics: These include:

- Higher proportion of population in older age bracket (over 65);
- Individuals living in rural areas had a higher than average risk of earning 50% below the UK mean income and 60% below the median income both Before Housing Costs and After Housing Costs, whilst those in the Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area and Urban areas were at a lesser risk. [Family Resources Survey Urban-Rural Report Northern Ireland 2005-2006]
- Lack of access to information and advice through word of mouth, social networks and signposting services;
- Personal reluctance to admit the existence of poverty and disadvantage – the notion of deprivation carries a stigma at odds with a culture of self-reliance and 'making do';
- Limited access to employment opportunities and childcare facilities;
- Falling farm incomes;
- The effects of centralisation and rationalisation of services resulting in lower access to services and poorer quality of provision to, for example, health, education, transport, post offices and shops;
- Fuel poverty due to higher dependence on personal transport and higher heating costs;
- Higher rate of unfit housing;
- Greater isolation and invisibility of vulnerable groups such as lone parents, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, gay, lesbian and transgender, and older people.
- Poor transport infrastructure.

All parts of Northern Ireland are experiencing a growing older population with the number of pensioners set to increase from 17% of Northern Ireland's population in 2007, to 24% in 2017 and 32% in 2036. A great number of our older population has a disability and/or mobility problems and is affected by soaring costs of basic goods and services. The need has never been greater for accessible transport services to serve some of the most vulnerable and marginalised in rural communities.

25% of the Northern Ireland rural population currently receives a minimal level of service from conventional bus services (Sub regional transport plan 2015)

Conventional bus services may not always be the most suitable mode rural older and rural disabled people. In 2007, 45% of older people in Northern Ireland who owned a Senior Smart pass have never used it. (DRD, 2007)

Research carried out by Rural Lift for South West Fermanagh (one of the 18 community transport partnerships in Northern Ireland) in 2009 found that 58% of their users came from the older population, whilst 27% of users were people with disabilities.

Access to bus services is much poorer in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain; 10% of respondents in Great Britain compared with 23% of respondents in Northern Ireland said there were no bus services linking their neighbourhoods with nearby facilities. (Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey Research Update. May 2002)

Lack of access to bus services is more acute in rural areas than in urban areas, but it is a much more serious problem in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain. 42% of rural respondents in Northern Ireland said there were no bus services which could take them to local shops and services, compared to just 16% of rural respondents in Great Britain. (Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey Research Update. May 2002)

Public Transport is highly relevant to health inequality among disabled people - 'households which contain a person with a limiting long-term illness are less likely to have access to a car than other households [68% vs. 82%] (NISRA 2001 Census of Population. A recent DRC study found that one third (35%) of disabled people found it difficult to go to their local hospital and one fifth (20%) found it difficult to get to their GP. (DRC, 2006 Secondary Analysis of Existing Data on Disabled People's Use and Experiences of Public Transport in Great Britain. The accessibility differential may be producing a profound effect on those in rural areas and on older people and disabled people.

Research from Age Concern and Help the Aged (2009) shows that more than 800 older people a day in the U.K. suffer falls on buses. The report also shows that nearly two million older people are concerned about falling while a passenger. As thousands of older people are falling on buses there is the concern that one fall or even the fear of falling can have a devastating effect on an older person's life and long-term mobility as many will be too afraid to travel by bus again.

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In the recently published Northern Ireland Life and Times (2008) 83% of people questioned have identified with providing transport /driving to benefit people in the community who were not related to them and were not being paid for it. The age group with the highest percentage of providing this service came from the 65+ age group.

Consultation Questions

Has the improvement in the accessibility of public transport (i.e. buses, trains, Door-2-door services etc) increased the travel opportunities for disabled and older people?

There is no doubt that the accessibility of public transport has increased the travel opportunities for disabled and older people in recent years. However it must be recognised that some areas have experienced greater progression than others. For example, urban areas are much better served in terms of frequency and presence of services than rural areas and RCN would welcome increased work from DRD in terms of accessibility planning to address the needs of rural older and disabled people.

What are the remaining barriers to making public transport accessible for disabled people and older people?

In terms of rural older and disabled people there needs to be further progress made in ensuring that all Ulsterbus vehicles are fully accessible. It only takes one instance where people with mobility problems experience difficulty accessing transport services to put them off from using them again.

There needs to be work done in terms of ensuring that staff are trained to enable them to work with people with disabilities. There are still many instances where people with disabilities and older people feel that staff are not able to relate well to their situation. Disability awareness training should be undertaken by organisations that have the best knowledge and experience of disability and mobility issues rather than training organisations which demonstrate the best 'value for money'.

In terms of information availability and the way it is provided, there is still some work to do on ensuring those who are in greatest need of accessible transport are aware that it is there for them and this information is conveyed effectively. Those living in rural areas tend to use public transport least but often need it most. Awareness campaigns should focus on rural areas and

local community development organisations could be used as a mechanism for disseminating important relevant information.

The type of services needed by older people and people with disabilities are an effective door to door service. However RCN would be concerned that rural transport partnerships will cease providing important transport services to groups (senior citizens and disability groups) when the roll out of Dial a Lift occurs in October 2009. RCN welcomes that the ATS 2009 – 2012 will review the provision of Door-to-Door services in rural areas however feels that there should be more commitment to providing a transport service which will be an effective long term solution to rural dwellers who are isolated and marginalised. RCN would welcome support given to more flexible services where booking is not required as much as 24 hours in advance and would welcome greater support for volunteer car driver schemes and semi-scheduled services through the rural transport partnerships in rural areas. These appear to be more effective in addressing transport poverty in deep rural areas.

RCN would welcome concessionary fares being available for older and disabled people on community transport services in rural areas given the fact that these services are widely used by older and disabled people in rural areas and in some areas are the only form of transport available.

The new ATS draft Action Plan includes new actions to improve the accessibility of transport, do you agree with them?

The new actions are commendable; RCN would see all the actions listed in the document as relevant to improving the accessible transport infrastructure for older and disabled people living in rural areas.

However RCN would urge the Department to provide more commitment in terms of action P14 A04 Pg 25. It is stated that they will undertake to 'Review the provision of Door-to-Door services in rural areas'. RCN feels that this is not a strong pledge to address the issues of poor transport provision in rural areas and given the fact that there will be no marketing campaign for the new Dial a Lift service, feels that the needs of rural dwellers are not being considered on a long term basis.

Are there any actions which have not been included within the draft Action Plan that you would like to see included?

RCN would welcome more focus on rural areas and more research with for example demonstration projects which look at alternative ways of addressing transport problems for rural older and disabled people.

There is also a need for more consultation with rural dwellers on the best routes to develop in rural areas and where to place bus stops. RCN would welcome consideration given to older people and people with disabilities living in rural areas being able to hail buses from anywhere along bus routes rather than at designated bus stops.